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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 PHNOM PENH 002084

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STATE FOR EAP/MLS, DRL/IL, EB/TPP/ABT  
STATE PLEASE PASS TO USTR FOR DAVID BISBEE  
COMMERCE FOR ITA/OTEXA  
LABOR FOR ILAB

E.O. 12958: N/A  
TAGS: [ELAB](#) [ECON](#) [KTEX](#) [CB](#)  
SUBJECT: RIVAL UNIONS ORDER GENERAL STRIKE, END TO  
NEGOTIATIONS

REF: PHNOM PENH 1928

1. (SBU) Summary. Pro-government union federation leader Chuon Mom Thol has told members of his federation to stop participating in bilateral negotiations with garment factory owners. The directive comes after several pro-government unions joined with independent and pro-opposition unions in continuing to negotiate even after a tripartite body set the monthly minimum wage at USD 50. Pro-opposition union leader Chea Mony has called for a general strike to start in December unless garment factory owners return to the negotiating table, something factory owners say they will do only if they are able to negotiate non-wage issues like illegal strikes and union violence. Meanwhile, Chea Mony has privately said that he is likely to resign if the general strike is unsuccessful. End Summary.

Unions Told to Stop Negotiating with Factory Owners  
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2. (SBU) Chuon Mom Thol, the pro-government union federation leader, ordered members of his federation to stop participating in bilateral negotiations with the Garment Manufacturers Association of Cambodia (GMAC). On October 21, he sent a text message to union leaders within the Cambodian Confederation of Trade Unions, a pro-government and often pro-management group, telling them to withdraw from negotiations due to the Labor Advisory Committee's October 19 decision to increase the minimum wage. CCTU union leaders had mixed reactions to the directive. Those who had been loyally following Chuon Mom Thol seemed to think that additional negotiations would yield little anyway, while union leaders who had been operating more independently in the negotiations told LES Labor Assistant they had no choice but to follow instructions.

3. (SBU) International Labor Organization Chief Technical Advisor John Ritchotte also relayed reports that Oum Mean, a Secretary of State at the Ministry of Labor, had phoned

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several pro-government unions who had participated in bilateral negotiations October 20 and told them not to participate in further negotiations. The embassy was able to confirm one of these calls -- to Nuon Chantha, one of the elected negotiators representing the IFC. According to Nuon Chantha, the Secretary of State warned that if he did not withdraw from the negotiations, unspecified action would be taken against him.

## FTU President Calls for General Strike in December

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¶4. (SBU) On Nov. 3, Chea Mony, president of the pro-opposition Free Trade Union (FTU), issued a call for a general strike in December unless GMAC resumes bilateral negotiations with interested unions. While Chea Mony has not publicly set a date for the strike to begin, he told us privately on Nov. 21 that the strike would begin on December 18--a date GMAC had already reported to us as the rumored start date. For their part, GMAC says that they are willing to continue negotiating, but that they are unwilling to talk about the FTU's main demand--a USD 5 increase in the recently set monthly minimum wage--and instead want a chance to focus on their concerns, namely illegal strikes and union violence.

Moreover, GMAC is frustrated by the competing voices within the union movement, and wants a clear sense of who is truly representing the workers. GMAC reports that some unions have privately asked for a USD 1 per month increase, an effort GMAC sees as a union attempt to save face.

¶5. (SBU) Chea Mony predicted that up to 100,000 workers might join in the general strike, but gave conflicting answers as to which other unions would participate. He said at one point that he did not know if any other unions would join with a FTU-led strike, but later claimed that several pro-government unions as well as his typical pro-opposition and independent partners would participate. (Comment: This change seemed to be an attempt to project confidence rather than the result of new commitments from other unions. End Comment.)

### Possible Resignation, Office Closure

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PHNOM PENH 00002084 002 OF 002

¶6. (SBU) Chea Mony also warned that the FTU would lose their current office location, as the landlord refused to renew the lease. Rather than directly mentioning concerns about FTU's political activities, the landlord cited spiritual worries relating to the bodies of two slain union leaders which were brought to the office following their assassinations in 2004.

While Chea Mony notified the embassy of this problem several weeks ago, he did not respond to offers for GSO recommendations of realtors who would be willing to work with the FTU.

¶7. (SBU) On November 24, Chea Mony told Labor Officer that he was likely to resign if the general strike effort wasn't successful. He described himself as "ashamed" and compared himself and GMAC to "tigers at an impasse." Chea Mony noted that in Europe and the United States, when leaders can't achieve their goals, they resign, and said he was doing the same. He said that he had already fulfilled his duty to the workers, and would be willing to work in an advisory capacity after his resignation.

¶8. (SBU) The FTU President offered mixed views of what might happen to the FTU after his departure. At one point he noted that Vice President Sam Srey Mom would become Acting President and Cambodian Independent Teachers Association President Rong Chhun was likely to be elected president, but later speculated that the FTU might collapse. In addition to the lack of a strong leader and difficulty in finding a new office, Chea Mony revealed that the union is having financial problems. Increased labor disputes have created the need for additional staff, and existing staff members are clamoring for higher wages that the union cannot afford.

### Comment

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¶9. (SBU) Within just a few weeks, the pendulum has swung from a remarkable show of cooperation among Cambodia's

traditionally fractious unions to a dramatic re-assertion of fraying alliances. Pro-government union leader Chuon Mom Thol has been losing standing among both the international labor community and other labor leaders; the level of union support for him is also questionable. His eagerness to end bilateral negotiations and ask for government intervention has convinced many that his labor activities are largely a pretense for maintaining his status as a CPP insider.

¶10. (SBU) Comment continued. Meanwhile, Chea Mony seems bent on his now familiar pattern of aggressive threats and persistent fatalism. His calls for a general strike are fairly vague and uncoordinated now, but similar calls in May escalated in June and led to bilateral negotiations with GMAC and a USD 5 per month increase in the minimum wage. This assertive stance is juxtaposed against his resolute inaction with regard to practical matters, such as finding a new FTU headquarters location. While Mony's leadership clearly has its flaws, his resignation would likely lead to a quiescent union under Acting President Sam Srey Mom, or the reduction of an effective Rong Chhun-Chea Mony labor coalition to a single leader -- which would likely be Rong Chhun. End Comment.  
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